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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR G, EUR/WE, AND OES/IHA; HHS FOR OGHA; GENEVA  
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SUBJECT: SPAIN PLAYS DOWN AVIAN INFLUENZA THREAT

REF: MADRID 3489 AND PREVIOUS

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SUMMARY  
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1. The reported arrival of the H5N1 virus in Greece and a flurry of EU and national meetings on Avian Influenza have kept "Bird Flu" in the Spanish headlines over the past week. Spanish Health and Agriculture Ministry spokespersons having been urging calm, alleging that Avian Influenza is not likely to arrive on Spanish shores anytime soon and that when it does arrive, the public health authorities will be prepared to respond. END SUMMARY.

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PRIME MINISTER URGES PREVENTION AND PRUDENCE  
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2. After meeting with French Prime Minister de Villepin in Barcelona October 17, Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero urged "prevention and prudence" in meeting the challenge posed by Avian Influenza. He indicated that the measures already adopted by his government were adequate in the event that a human Avian Influenza pandemic emerged and called for stepped up international cooperation to meet the threat.

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AGRICULTURE BELIEVES OUTBREAK UNLIKELY BEFORE SPRING  
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3. The Spanish Agriculture Ministry announced October 17 that it was "very unlikely" that Avian Influenza would arrive in Spain this winter, but could possibly reach Spain in the spring of 2006. The Ministry based its argument on an analysis of bird migratory routes, noting that birds migrating south through Spain this winter would not likely carry the virus, but might carry the disease to Spain when they return north from Africa next spring. Notwithstanding the current threat, the Ministry announced that it had stepped up the monitoring of open air poultry farms located near the major bird migratory routes.

4. The policy line of the Agriculture Ministry is neatly captured in the following October 17 quote from Livestock Director General Beatriz Garcés de Marcilla: "The appearance of a suspect bird in Greece has not altered our perception of the threat, even if it is confirmed that this bird is infected with the H5N1 virus. We are almost totally convinced that the cases registered in Romania and Turkey, like those in Russia, Kazakhstan and Bulgaria, were caused by the dissemination of the virus by migrating birds. They (the infections) coincide very well with the habitual bird migration routes toward the south during this season. It is very unlikely that the current migration will introduce the virus into Spain. The probability (of this occurring) is higher in the spring, when the birds migrate north. But we should remain calm. First, because we do not expect anything like a massive infection of poultry stocks. The sickest birds cannot migrate and they can only provoke isolated infections. These outbreaks can be rapidly controlled via preventative killings (of poultry) within a radius of three kilometers. Furthermore, the great majority of farm poultry in Spain is raised indoors. Only 10 percent are kept outdoors and we are going to reinforce our monitoring of those (open air facilities) that coincide with the principal bird migration routes."

5. Furthermore, Agriculture Minister Elena Espinosa delivered what she herself labeled a message of "tranquillity" on October 16, stressing that Spanish poultry consumption practices (e.g., avoiding consuming raw poultry) made it unlikely that a human outbreak of Avian Influenza could be spread via poultry consumption. She admitted that a human outbreak could be spread via inhalation, but again noted that Spanish poultry raising practices (e.g., farmers do not generally live near their birds), would help limit the spread of any potential human outbreak. The Minister nonetheless stressed that she had ordered stepped up monitoring of Spanish poultry farms and that Spain would continue to prohibit the import of poultry or poultry products from countries which have reported Avian Influenza infections among their poultry stocks. Her Ministry also

announced last week that it would order five million more animal H5N1 vaccines, giving Spain a total stockpile of 15 million animal vaccines.

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HEALTH MINISTRY CLAIMS IT IS READY FOR ALL EVENTUALITIES  
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16. The Health Ministry has also urged calm and continues to resist growing calls for Spain to purchase more anti-virals (e.g., "Tamiflu") to combat any possible human Avian Influenza epidemic. Spain has ordered two million "Tamiflu" treatments (costing a reported 14 million euros). Spain has only received 10,000 treatments to date and is not expected to receive the full two million before June 2006. The two million, once delivered, would serve to treat four percent of the Spanish population.

17. In October 14 testimony before the Spanish Congress, Health Minister Elena Salgado said her Ministry was "reasonably comfortable" with the April 2005 decision to order two million "Tamiflu" treatments but would revisit that decision should the majority of Spain's 17 regions wish to have more stocks on hand. She said that the anti-virals, though paid for out of regional health budgets, would be held in a central store and would be diverted to wherever in Spain human outbreaks were first reported. Special preference (in receiving anti-viral treatment) would be given to "high risk" populations (e.g., the elderly, chronically ill, health and poultry workers, and those with depressed immune systems). An unidentified percentage of the anti-virals would be reserved for the Spanish Armed Forces.

18. Salgado said she would push her EU colleagues to adopt on an EU-wide basis the Spanish model of maintaining a central anti-viral stockpile that could be diverted to initial infection outbreaks. Summing up Spanish preparations to date, Salgado argued that Madrid has "taken all the necessary measures" to meet a possible human pandemic, that "our health system is prepared to act with efficiency," and that "we are prepared to detect any case (of human Avian Influenza) that arrives and can meet all eventualities." She asked the Spanish people to "stay calm" and criticized some regional health authorities for creating "unnecessary and unjust alarm" among the public.

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EU CALL TO STOCKPILE TAMIFLU MOST UNWELCOME  
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19. The October 17 EU call for member states to stockpile a sufficient quantity of anti-virals to treat 25 percent of national populations will probably force the Health Ministry to order more anti-virals, despite Spanish doubts about "Tamiflu's" ability to treat the as of yet unknown viral strain that would emerge to threaten human populations, the Roche Company's reported inability to meet further orders until well into 2006, and the stated Spanish preference for assembling a shared EU "Tamiflu" stock (that could be directed toward outbreaks), rather than having each country chasing ever more elusive anti-viral stocks. The Health Ministry revealed its ire at the EU decision October 17, with an unnamed Ministry source telling the Spanish press that Spain has "no idea" where the EU got the idea that the WHO had recommended stocking anti-virals to treat 25 percent of national populations. The same source noted that "no OMS document mentions any recommended percentage for anti-viral coverage."

10. Senior Spanish Health Ministry officials will meet October 18 with health officials from the country's 17 autonomous regions (which have line authority over public health issues) to discuss Avian Influenza preparations. One result may be the decision, against national level recommendations, to purchase more anti-virals. Ordering enough "Tamiflu" to cover the 25 percent of the Spanish population recommended by the EU would cost Spain's regions over 80 million euros (and certainly would not be delivered until late 2006 at the earliest). Nonetheless, given the fact that many EU nations have already decided to cover larger percentages of their populations and that Spain's largest opposition party has publicly called for purchasing more anti-virals, Spain will likely soon add yet another "Tamiflu" order to Roche's growing backlog.

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